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ABSTRACT

Residents in several states and communities ranging in size from farms to inner cities of more than 500,000 people were surveyed to further explore the strong relationship between community ties and newspaper readership indicated by results of a previous study sponsored by the American Newspaper Publishers Association. The findings revealed that people felt strong attachments to the communities in which they lived and to those which they had left. Community size made little difference in the strength of attachment to where they lived, except for those persons living on farms or in isolated areas who had significantly higher community attachment index scores than other participants in the study. No community size differences were found in multiple newspaper readership or in readers' satisfaction with the content of their preferred newspapers. But readers living on farms and in isolated areas spent significantly less time reading their preferred newspaper and they were much less willing to pay more for their preferred newspaper. (HOD)

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COMMUNITY SIZE, COMMUNITY ATTACHMENT AND NEWSPAPER READERSHIP

by

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ABSTRACT

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HIGHLIGHTS: The strong relationship between community ties and newspaper readership, supported in a previous study sponsored by the American Newspaper Publishers Association, is confirmed in a broader study involving residents in several states and communities ranging in size from farms to inner cities of 500,000+ population. The relationship holds regardless of community size.

People feel strong attachments to the communities in which they live and to those they have left. Community size made little difference in the strength of attachment to where one lives, except those persons living on farms or in isolated areas had significantly higher community attachment index scores than other participants in the study. We found no community size differences in multiple newspaper readership nor in reader satisfaction with the content of their preferred newspapers. But readers who live on farms and in isolated areas spend significantly less time reading their preferred newspaper and they are much less willing to pay more for their preferred newspaper.

1

INTRODUCTION

Beginning in the late 1970s the American Newspaper Publishers Association began sponsoring research on the relationship between newspaper use and community attachment or identification (Stone, 1977; Stephens, 1978; Stevenson, 1979; Stamm and Fortini-Campbell, 1981; Stamm and Weis, 1981; McCombs and Poindexter, 1982; and Olien, Donohue and Tichenor, 1982; Stamm and Fortini-Campbell, 1983; Stephens, 1983). Publishers became interested in new lines of inquiry as circulation to number of households and the total number of daily newspapers continued to decline. The predominant research perspective for analyzing readership and circulation problems in the newspaper industry had been demographics, according to an extensive review by the ANPA News Research Center of studies conducted during the period 1950-76 (McCombs, 1977).

Some observers were directly challenging the worth of newspapers as a community news source. For example, David Shaw, press critic for the Los Angeles Times, wrote in the February 1977 issue of Quill:

> The traditional newspaper function of keeping readers well informed about their neighborhood and their nation is of considerably diminished importance to people not only preoccupied with the burdens of inflation and compulsively searching for themselves through EST, Yoga...Primal Therapy...

The traditional newspaper function referred to by Shaw had been supported by earlier studies (Edelstein and Larsen, 1960; Greenberg,

1964; Bogart and Orenstein, 1966; and Grotta, Larkin and DePlois, 1975). Shaw's comments about the decline of newspapers as a community news medium suggests the link between community attachment and readership of newspapers does not apply today for anything but perhaps the small town, or rural area.

The link between community attachment and newspaper reading habits was strongly supported in an early study sponsored by ANPA. Stephens (1978a; 1978b) found strong support for a positive relationship between community attachment and frequency of readership of a most preferred paper (usually the paper serving the community of strongest attachment); between community attachment and loyalities regarding newspaper subscriptions; and between multiple newspaper readership and multiple community attachments. He also found adults with a strong sense of community attachment are more likely to make recommendations for improving the format and content of their newspapers than adults with weak community ties. Only partial support was reported for the hypothesis that a strong sense of community attachment to the community/place in which one lives is a more important determinant of one's newspaper reading habits than is one's age, years of residence in the community, family income and education.

Strength of community attachment to current community of residence was determined by constructing an "index" from items developed by Kasarda and Janowitz (1974).[1]

[1] The items and the way responses were scored are:

1. Do you feel "at home" in the Columbia area? A "yes" response was scored a "1," other responses a "0."
2. Suppose for some reason you had to move away from

This study provided evidence supporting the traditional, but now circumspect, view that newspapers are the most important source of community and regional news, for "natives" as well as "newcomers," such as transient military personnel. Even more disquieting for the "meism" philosophers such as David Shaw, was the revelation that most people have a strong sense of community identification -- even for places once called home-- and these identifiers are especially avid newspaper readers.

Nevertheless, the study was flawed by its narrow scope and conceptual amorphousness. For example, the study included armed forces personnel and resident civilians of only one southern city, 200-500,000 population. Could the results linking readership habits and community attachment be generalized to other community settings of dissimilar or even similar size? Could a large metro newspaper editor infer that

here...would you be very sorry, sorry, indifferent, pleased, or very pleased to leave? "Indifferent" to "very sorry" responses were scored "1," others "0."

3. How interested are you in what goes on here in the Columbia area... very interested, interested, indifferent, disinterested, or very disinterested? "Indifferent" to "very interested" responses were scored "1," others "0."

4. How many of your adult friends live in the Columbia area... none of them, half or less, most of them, or all of them? "Half or less" to "all of them" responses were scored "1," others "0."

5. How many of your relatives and in-laws live in the Columbia area... none of them, half or less, most of them, or all of them? "Half or less" to "all of them" responses were scored "1," others "0."

6. Do you belong to any formal organizations in the Columbia area... groups like civic, social, and fraternal organizations... or charitable groups, religious organizations...political parties... public bodies or committees concerned with community affairs... or work related

readership of his newspaper is significantly broader in scope among people with strong community ties?

Furthermore, the study failed to determine the spatial parameters of community attachment -- "what comes to mind" when one is asked "where he lives?". Nor did this study identify why people have a "sense of belonging" for other communities in which they have lived, though many participants in the research said they still had "at home" feelings for places once lived in.

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organizations? "Yes" response was scored "1," others "0."

7. If "yes," to above question, Rs were asked a fixed-response question about organizational participation. Minimal level participation for a score of "1" was regular attendance at the meetings of one of the above groups.

8. Which of the following best describes your participation in local social activities, such as going to movies, concerts, plays, sporting events...playing team sports...or visiting local parks? "Occasionally do these things" to "very frequently do these things" were scored a "1," others a "0."

"Indifferent" responses to the attitude items were scored "1" because they may reflect a latent but unemotional attachment to the community. The theoretical range of the community attachment "index" was "0" to "8."

2

MULTI-STATE STUDY OF COMMUNITY ATTACHMENT AND READERSHIP

So a multi-state study was conducted in 1981 to determine the spatial limitations of community attachment and to establish or refute the external validity of the previous study.

The primary focus in this paper is whether community size is a contingent condition affecting the relationship between community attachment and newspaper readership. The study was funded by a university foundation grant to the author. The findings are based on a multi-stage area probability sample, representing each region of the country, and communities, ranging from farms to inner cities with populations of 500,000 and more. The population of the United States was distributed by geographic regions according to census classifications. States were rank ordered by population size based on 1978 census data, and listed within regions according to the original rank order. States were randomly selected from each of nine different regions of the country. A zip code directory was used to identify the universe of incorporated areas of a given size within each randomly selected state. Incorporated areas of varying size within selected states were then randomly selected. Eight different categories of community size were used to stratify the sample. Farm, ranch and isolated areas of under 6200 were identified by telephone prefix numbers from telephone directories in the selected states. Random digit dialing was used to select

respondents for telephone interviews. A respondent grid system was used to select a representative sample of adult (18 years of age and older) men and women. The initial plan was to conduct 1,800 interviews; resources were limited, however, and only 698 interviews were completed.

The median age of our sample is 36.2; 92% of the respondents are white; 54% are males; 62% are married; 28% are college graduates; and 49% reported family income in excess of $21,000 a year. Only 4% are in the military.

About one fourth of the respondents are from Connecticut and one fifth are from North Carolina. About 15% are from Minnesota; 9% from Texas; 8% from Kansas; 6% from California; two per cent from Montana and one per cent from Colorado.

About one-half of the respondents live in communities populated by 50,000 or fewer persons. About 14% live in inner city areas with more than 500,000 people; 12% live in suburbs with 500,000 or more people; and 6% live on farms. When asked, "Where do you live, what comes to mind?," about 69% said a town or city; 14% said a neighborhood; 10% said an area or state; and four per cent said a region of the country.

About 24% of the respondents say they have always lived in the area where they currently live; median years of residence there was 14. Three of every four respondents have lived in other areas--about three different communities during their lifetime (median).

2.1 COMMUNITY ATTACHMENT

Community attachment was operationalized in the same manner as the previous study, but respondents were asked two additional questions:

1. The first question, after the introduction, was this open-end question: "When you are asked... where do you live?...what comes to mind? Is it a particular neighborhood, town or city, area of the state, region of the country, or what?"
2. After the series of questions about how long they have lived in current community of residence, and their "at home" feelings for places they have lived, respondents with feelings for other places they have lived, were asked this open-end question: "People have a lot of different reasons for having an "at home" feeling...sense of attachment...for places they used to live. Is there a particular reason why you still feel this way?"

Each of the hypotheses supported in the original ANPA sponsored study is supported in this study (Stephens, 1982). Newspapers are the preferred community news source by a majority of respondents, but especially favored by those with strong ties to community of residence. Persons with strong community ties are more dependent on print media for national and world news than are those with weak ties. But a majority of all respondents rely primarily on television for national and international news. Newspapers are preferred as a local news medium and television as a national and international news source.

Persons with strong community ties are much more likely to subscribe to their preferred newspaper than are those with weak ties. For example, 83% of those who scored above the median on the community

attachment index subscribe, compared to 68% of those with scores below the median.

But is community size a contingent condition affecting people's feelings of community attachment and newspaper reading habits?

2.2 COMMUNITY SIZE

To examine spatial differences in community identifications by size community we collapsed the original bivariate table (to get rid of cell sizes of five or less) into a 3 X 8 table. We found no significant association (Chi-square=14.12, w/14 df, p=.40, C=.14). Farm residents are less inclined to identify with a particular town or city, but more inclined than others to identify with a region of the state or area of the country. Inner-city residents are much more inclined than others to identify with a neighborhood only. And suburbanites are much more inclined to identify with a town or city only. This relationship is shown in Table 1.

Community size made little difference in the strength of attachment to where one lives, except those persons living on farms or in isolated areas had significantly higher community attachment index scores than other participants in the study ($t=2.15$, $p<.05$). Community size subgroup means on the community attachment index are shown in Table 2. We found no community size differences in multiple readership nor in reader satisfaction with the content of their preferred newspapers. Readers who live on farms and isolated areas spend significantly less time reading their preferred newspaper ($t=-2.63$, $p<.05$) and those who live in rural areas and small towns are much less willing to pay more

TABLE 1

Spatial Differences In Community Identifications
by Community Size

Community Size	Community Identification* A	B	C	Total
Farm (N=44)	14%	59	27	100%
Rural-10,000 (N=128)	13%	70	17	100%
City 10-50,000 (N=170)	16%	68	16	100%
City 50-100,000 (N=80)	9%	71	20	100%
City 100-200,000 (N=51)	14%	69	17	100%
City 200-500,000 (N=36)	17%	67	16	100%
Suburb 500,000+ (N=84)	12%	80	8	100%
Inner City 500,000+ (N=97)	20%	64	16	100%

Totals (N=690)	14%	69%	17%	100%

Chi-Square=14.12, df=14, p=.40, C=.14

* Community Identification Codes: A=Neighborhood Only; B=Town or City Only; C=Area of State, Region of Country, or Combination.

TABLE 2

Differences in Community Attachment by Community Size

Community Attachment Index:
Mean Score (Standard Error)

	N	Mean	SE
Farm	44	6.16	(0.22)*
Rural-10,000	131	5.57	(0.14)
City 10-50,000	172	5.68	(0.13)
City 50-100,000	81	5.72	(0.20)
City 100-200,000	51	5.71	(0.21)
City 200-500,000	36	5.64	(0.24)
Suburb 500,000+	84	5.70	(0.16)
Inner City 500,000+	98	5.52	(0.17)
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Totals	697	5.68	

* Significantly higher index score than overall sample, $t=2.15$ ($p<.05$).

for their preferred newspaper (t=-4.25, p=.001). Community size subgroup means for time reading are reported in Table 3.

TABLE 3

Differences in Time Reading Preferred Newspaper
by Community Size

Time Each Day
Mean Score (Standard Error)

	N	Mean	SE
Farm	41	32.07	(2.84)*
Rural-10,000	116	42.20	(3.21)
City 10-50,000	150	37.94	(2.01)
City 50-100,000	73	36.51	(2.60)
City 100-200,000	46	42.46	(3.78)
City 200-500,000	33	37.72	(4.23)
Suburb 500,000+	79	46.20	(3.85)
Inner City 500,000+	87	37.31	(2.96)
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Totals	626	39.54	

* Significantly less than overall sample, t= -2.63 ($p<.05$).

IMPLICATIONS

The implications of community attachment-readership research for the newspaper industry depend on whether studies show that readers with strong community ties have different content preferences than readers with weak community ties. The research setting for particular studies is also important because empirical observations in small towns and cities of 20,000 or fewer people, for example, where most weekly newspapers in the United States are published, may not be generalizeable to larger communities or cities with a major metro center. Moreover, external validity will depend on the extent to which multiple measures of the concept "community attachment" or "community identification" can be shown to be related to each other and to the readership measures under investigation.

This multi-state study suggests the ANPA results linking readership habits and community attachment can be generalized to other community settings of dissimilar or even similar size. Soon after the ANPA study in Columbia (SC) in 1978, The State and The Columbia Record newspapers began a very successful "Neighbors" section which appears each Thursday. The State is the largest daily newspaper in South Carolina. The executive editors and publishers of these newspapers consider the "Neighbors" community news innovation one of the most successful in the long history of their newspapers. "Neighbors" is the most

frequently read section on Thursdays. "Neighbors" was originally started to boost sales of the afternoon paper, The Columbia Record. But "Neighbors" not only contributed to significant increases in sales of the afternoon paper; it also increased sales of the successful morning paper. "Neighbors" is still a regular section in Thursday editions of the newspapers.

Christy Bulkeley, former Gannett vice president and publisher and founder of Women in Communications, Inc., told attendees at a recent conference of media management and economics practitioners and teachers that newspaper publishers must continue focusing on their communities. "Newspapers must cover the whole community; they must protect that historical function in the information age."

Ron Handberg, general manager of WCCO (Minneapolis) and vice president of Midwest Communications, Inc., also told this group that local television stations must serve their communities and not depend on the networks to deliver audiences. In Minnesota television stations emphasis on local advertising and local news was demonstrated last year when one station paid $3 million for the rights to televise the state high school ice hockey tournament.

These insights and developments suggest media managers in many different markets understand the importance of serving their local communities.

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